

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH
MAJOR GENERAL KURT CICHOWSKI, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF, STRATEGY,
PLANS AND ASSESSMENT, MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ, AND
BRIGADIER NEIL BAVERSTOCK, DIRECTOR OF RESERVE FORCES AND
CADETS,
ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

SUBJECT: THE REGIONAL TURNOVER TO IRAQI CONTROL OF KURDISH
REGION

MODERATOR: TIM KILBRIDE, AMERICAN FORCES PRESS SERVICE

TIME: 10:30 A.M. EDT

DATE: THURSDAY, MAY 31, 2007

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right.

So, the way we'll run this, General, is just if you can open up with any opening comments you have or we can go straight into Q&A. Either way, for our bloggers online, just please remember to state your name and organization before you ask a question. And we'll go through the order of who called in. I'll call that and then if there's time for follow-ups, we'll get back to that.

So, Sir, if you have anything to say, go ahead.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Thanks, Tim. I appreciate that.

I will have opening comments that we can send to you if you'd like.

Well, good morning. And I appreciate you taking the time to discuss the regional Iraqi control ceremony -- what occurred yesterday -- and how the process of transferring security responsibility is impacting the operations here in Iraq.

You'll note that this ceremony was different in that it was a transfer of three different provinces for one region. The three provinces have been administered as a region since 2003 and the Kurdistan Regional Government requested that all three provinces be transferred together, and then the federal government of Iraq supported this decision. Now, let me give you a little background on the transfer process and how we arrived at the point of a Kurdistan Regional Government selection to hold this ceremony.

In June 2005, the prime minister of Iraq at the time announced a joint decision between the Iraqi government and the Multi-National Force Iraq to systematically handover the security responsibility in Iraq's 18 provinces to the provincial civil authorities under the control of the province's governor or the regional prime minister. The responsibility for security in a province becomes that of the local, as well as the national forces.

Well, in order to have a systematic process in place to oversee these transfers, the government of Iraq created the Joint Committee to Transfer Security Responsibility or the JCTSR. This committee's co-chaired by myself, as well as General Safah Abdurosa Hussein (ph), who's the deputy national security adviser. And this committee includes representatives from the U.S. embassy, the U.K. embassy, as well as the Iraq's minister of Defense and the minister of Interior.

Well, our initial goal was to develop a set of conditions to assess the readiness of each province for transfer of the security responsibility. Well, we agreed to focus on four areas our monthly assessments. These areas include the security of the region, as well as the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces involved -- primarily the police -- the governance and the status of the Multi-National Forces -- that means the relationship between them as well as the local governance capability itself.

Well, it's important to note that when we talk about security we're really talking about domestic security and, in other words, what is happening in the provinces and can a

local government take care of it, primarily with domestic police? Additionally, we assessed the Iraqi security forces, the army that is in the area. The training, manning and equipping are continually monitored to ensure the province is ready to succeed once the transfer of security has occurred. And the assessments that we are conducting are done at the provincial level both with the governor of the province, as well as the Multi-National division commander in the area. Together they do an assessment that is forwarded to this committee that I talked about.

Well, once the committee has assessed that it's ready and the recommendation has been made, we send that decision to the ministerial committee on national security who makes the final recommendation for the transfer to the prime minister of the federal government of Iraq.

Well, as a bit of history, in July 13th, 2006, Muthanna was the first province to transfer security responsibility control. It was a significant milestone in the successful development of our capacity -- of the Iraq capacity to govern themselves. And this is the ultimate reason for which we are all here. The second province to transition was Dhi Qar in September of 2006 and then Najaf in December the same year. Just last month, in April, Maysan transferred its security responsibility. Yesterday we marked the fifth, sixth and seventh provinces, leaving seven provinces yet to go.

Well, the ceremony included speeches from top governmental and military officials and a very colorful display of folk dancing, as well as a parade of the Kurdish Regional Government military forces. And I will say the environment up north is a little different than in the other parts of Iraq. There are four-star hotels going up there and many modern buildings, as well as an international airport with flights four times a week to Austria, as well as Lufthansa planning to come in here in September. It's very exciting and we're very hopeful to see the progress being made in that region, as well as the national security adviser saying that this is what the rest of Iraq should look like.

This transfer of security is an important milestone toward making the future even more prosperous for the government of Iraq.

Now, I'm ready to take any and all of your questions. So fire away.

MR. KILBRIDE: Great.

This is just on who dialed in first. Let's go through the list real fast. First we have Streiff from Red State; David Axe from Danger Room; Andrew Lubin; Michael Goldfarb and Grim from BlackFive. So Streiff, do you want to kick it off?

Q Sure.

The first thing I'd like to ask is on the security forces in Iraqi-Kurdistan, or these three provinces, is the Iraqi army there drawn from throughout Iraq or are the army units in Kurdistan primarily based on the old pesh merga?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: That's a question that's going to take a little while, so hang with me.

There are three parts of three divisions in that area: the Iraqi army divisions from the second, third and fourth divisions. The even numbered divisions were built on the National Guard. So the predominate forces in the second and fourth are Kurdish individuals; however, we have worked very hard to have a balance of all nationalities and ethnic backgrounds in not only the odds, but in the future development of the even number of the Iraqi divisions.

In addition, the constitution allows the formation of regional guards, or guards of the region. This particular force in the Kurdish region is made of the leftovers of the -- what we call the CPA-91 Militia, which in this particular case is a pesh merga, or what is left of the pesh merga, but they are now the Kurdish Regional Guards. Both the PDK as well as the KUP have formed together into one and they are now the Kurdish Regional Guards.

Q And sir, a quick follow up to that. Which division controls the area around Kirkuk?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: You have to understand that Kirkuk is not in the Kurdish region.

Q Well, the areas closest to Kirkuk.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: It's probably bounded on the third and fourth divisions -- third being on the west, fourth being on the east.

Q Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right.

David Axe.

Q General, thanks for taking the time to speak to us. I really appreciate it. This is David Axe with Danger Room and others.

So isn't it a kind of a dicey time to be handing over -- I know that Kurdistan has been de facto autonomous for quite awhile, but isn't it kind of a dicey time for an official handover what with the standoff on the border with Turkey?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: A couple of things I'll sit there and talk to you about. Number one, it's most interesting to listen to both the national security adviser from the federal government of Iraq, as well as the prime minister from the Kurdish region, and how, each one of them talked about how the Kurdish region itself is an indivisible part of

the government of Iraq as a whole, that each one is saying how, for example, their forces can be used. We have the Kurdish elements of the second and the third Iraqi army division here in Baghdad, for example. There is some discussions of the Iraqi Regional Guards being used in other areas of the country itself.

The second thing that's important to understand is the responsibility for the patrolling of the borders and control of the borders is an exclusive responsibility of the federal government by the constitution. So the federal government will still maintain the borders, whether it be between Syria and Iraq or Turkey and Iraq and Iran and Iraq or Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Q Well, you know, that didn't really answer my question. My question is how does the standoff with the Turkish government at the northern border with Turkey, how does that shape or affect the transition?

BRIG. BAVERSTOCK: This is Brigadier Baverstock, sitting deputy to General Cichowski -- if I may come in here.

What we're discussing, actually, is in fact the business for the government of Turkey and the government of Iraq. You've got to realize here that what we've done, as well as handing over internal security, the government of Iraq is actually a sovereign nation. And its external relations with its neighbors are its business, and therefore, it's for them to decide how they're going to deal with and respond to any overtures by the Turkish government.

And so one of things we're beginning to do, as this whole process goes on, is to hand back federal responsibility and allowing the government of Iraq to talk and establish its relations with its neighbors and hopefully establish them on a good, constructive basis. So it's not really one for us to answer. It's one that you really need to put to the government of Iraq.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: And David, if I could -- and I don't want to appear to be trumping, because that was a very good answer there -- but I want to be sure that you also understand that this is the first year that there has been a government of Iraq that has been freely elected in the democratic process to be able to deal with the government of Turkey in this manner and there are talks now underway.

Q Right, but that's sort of saying that handling the Turkey problem is strictly a federal responsibility isn't a realistic assessment of how power works up in Kurdistan. I'm sure you understand that, because, I mean, Kurdistan -- despite statements to the contrary -- is effectively autonomous. And surely there's got to be some extremely complicated -- it's an extremely complicated situation that surely weighs on coalition minds as, you know, these official handovers happen. I sort of feel like the question is being evaded here. It's got to be --

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Oh, David --

Q -- more complicated and graver than that.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: David, you're exactly right. It is one of the many complicated and multifaceted issues that we're dealing with here. But let me just put it in terms of a -- an experience I had yesterday. I was sitting next to the prime minister of the Kurdish region, Nechirvan Barzani, when a representative of the media from Turkey -- they were obviously great -- happened to come up -- they were obviously friends, each one of them asking each other about their fathers. Each one of them exchanged pleasantries and hugged and actually gave the traditional greeting they do in that particular area. The Turkish media represented -- told the prime minister how he was going to go back to Turkey today and meet with the Turkish prime minister and let him know that everything he saw indicated that he was very impressed with the ceremony and there was nothing to be concerned about. And so I will tell you that from that anecdote -- and they were speaking in English, which was -- so I could understand all of it to include the inflections that were involved. And so there's just an anecdote for you to talk about at the personal level as well.

Q Well, but that's just a cultural thing. I mean, that's -- that doesn't speak at all to the reality of the situation. I mean, that's just the way that Kurds and Arabs and Turks do business.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: David, there was real friendship here. Having been here this long I can tell you that.

Q Okay. So one more thing I got to slip in real quick. But what about the Kurdish nationalists up in the mountains? Isn't that a concern?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I will tell you that's one of a -- a lot of different concerns that we are here (sic) and that's something that I know that the government of Iraq is addressing, and I know that as I'm sure you are aware of the tripartite discussions that are ongoing, and again this is a government of Iraq and a government of Turkey there focused on an issue that this new young government here in Iraq is taking on.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Andrew Lubin?

Q Yes, good morning, gentlemen. Andrew Lubin from ON Point. Just kind of following with David's questions a little bit -- with the violence in the last two weeks up in Kurdistan, which is really the first time this has happened, you know, for the past few years, doesn't this make the Kurds want to close the border even tighter? My friends -- sources up there tell me they're shutting down the border to all Arabs. So how does this square with them being oil members of the government of Iraq when they don't want to let their alleged Sunni and Shi'a brothers up into the country or up into the region?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Gosh, Andrew, I've got to tell you I've not heard of that and that's one of the things that we were talking the other day with the border officials. Again, the control of the borders is a federal government thing and I've heard of no reports of any kind of shunning of any group whether it be on racial or ethnic or religious background.

Q (But that's just ?) coming from the Kurdish side, not from the Baghdad side.

BRIG. BAVERSTOCK: Well, it's interesting you hear that because I mean, the -- and they've come back to -- (inaudible) -- to relations between the Kurdish region and Turkey as well because it is more complicated than just a security issue. There's a huge amount of trade actually goes on between the Kurdish region and Turkey, so closing borders is going to hurt both sides and it's not necessarily in their interest so we haven't heard about borders being closed --

(Cross talk.)

Q -- more if I could --

BRIG. BAVERSTOCK: -- patrol the borders, yes, but not necessarily closure.

Q No -- no, this was more on the Iraqi side -- on the southern side than the northern side because there's huge -- most of the construction in Kurdistan is with Turkish construction companies.

BRIG. BAVERSTOCK: That's exactly right.

Q Yeah. But no, I was referring -- I was --

BRIG. BAVERSTOCK: I don't know how they can actually close the border. There is no border between the Kurdish region and the rest of Iraq, and there are checkpoints but there are checkpoints in a lot of places, and those checkpoints are there for internal security reasons. They're perfectly legitimate, and we've heard no reports they're actually turning people away on the basis of their ethnicity.

Q Okay.

Q Sir, it's with all due respect -- this is David Axe -- I've been to Kurdistan twice and I think that's not true. The checkpoints do turn Arabs away.

Q Yeah. And that's what I was hearing -- they will, you know, this -- I heard it in the future tense -- that they will be turning people away from who are, you know, who are Shi'as. Sunnis maybe -- Shi'as definitely -- do not want them. They're the troublemakers.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Well, gosh, that would be interesting because I have to tell you that's one of the issues that we have talked a lot about, and there are Kurds on our committee. There are Kurds that have come down and visited us and our going out there -- that's certainly an area that we will look into but I will tell you from the internal that we have not heard that.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Michael Goldfarb from Weekly Standard. You're up.

Q Hi. Thanks so much for taking the time to do this. My question is, again, I'm going to touch on Turkey here. I'm wondering if you guys have any military-to-military contacts at all with the Turks on the other side of the border -- if there's any kind of relationship or anything that would act as a brake if things were to spin out of control a little bit.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: There are discussions on many different levels, both state-to-state as well as there's a military liaison as a matter of fact here in the coalition operations on the other side of the city.

Q A Turkish liaison?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Yeah.

Q So you guys are in direct contact with the Turks essentially?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: He eats and sleeps over in Camp Victory and he is a member of the coalition operation cell.

Q Thank you.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: You bet.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Next up we've got Grim (ph) from Blackfive.

Q Good morning, gentlemen. I'm curious -- with the handover, will the coalition be moving forces out of Kurdistan? Will they be keeping roughly the same levels or are you in fact expecting an increase in the number of coalition forces in Kurdistan?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: As far as coalition forces, because of this particular transfer of security there'll be no change in the numbers of forces that are there. There is no direct relationship between the regional or the provincial transfer of Iraqi control and the number of forces. For example, down in Maysan there was no reduction in the forces there from last month. So no, there is no change in the numbers. Now, there's a very important change in status. Now, instead of controlling the operational environment,

now if a coalition force is going to maneuver through the area they must coordinate with the Kurdish regional government -- in particular the joint coordination center -- prior to their maneuvering or conducting any type of training or exercise with the regional security forces.

Q Thank you.

MR. KILBRIDE: We've got a few minutes for follow-up questions if anyone has anything else they'd like to ask.

Q Yeah, a general question if you don't mind. How do the Kurds -- what I was trying to say -- they have their own economy. It's like they're trying -- they have their own flag -- they got their own government. It's like they're trying not to be assimilated except on a superficial basis into Iraq. It strikes me they're giving Maliki some lip service. Beyond that, they're going their own way. How does that square with one, you know, unified and friendly Iraq? I don't see it.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: I think that's a little harsh. For example, they had both anthems played yesterday. There was more than the lip service of the talk between the indivisible whole. There's a tremendous amount of discussions that are going on for the federated state that is taking on the Kurdish bloc in the parliament is very active. The determination of the hydrocarbon and the revenue sharing is one that is of great interest throughout the entire country as a whole, and the determination of the military budget for that will be inclusive of the regional forces is something that both sides are talking to next. So there are a number of issues that they are taking on as an indivisible whole, not as two separate independent parties.

Q Okay. Appreciate that.

Q Hello, sir, this is David Axe again. I hate to keep disagreeing but the KRG has not expressed any interest in sharing its own oil revenues from the new fields up in Dohuk and elsewhere. So I mean, so far there is no -- at least not -- there's not going to be any oil revenue sharing from Kurdistan down to Baghdad.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: David, it must be important that you understand the legislation that is currently going through the process. There is one particular law in the hydrocarbon implementation that talks to new fields versus old fields, and I believe you're referring to the one version of it where new fields do not have to be shared but that could be not just in the region -- in the Kurdish region, but it could be in the potential for the new fields out west as well as some new undeveloped fields down in the south.

MR. KILBRIDE: Right. Does anyone else have anything? Otherwise we can move in --

Q Hey, Tim, I've got a question. This is Streiff at Red State.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right.

Q Hey, I've got a question about the PKK and what's being done to bring them under control. And also a few months ago there were news stories that flashed about the various Iranian incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan to sort of stamp out separatist movements directed against the Iranian Kurds. What's being done to bring that area under control?

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Okay, two very different issues there. For the first one, the PKK is a -- as we talked earlier is an issue of some increasing and some very intense discussions between the government of Turkey and the government of Iraq. As I'm sure that you're aware, there's also the tripartite discussions that are currently in a pause state but retired General Rawlson (ph) is the U.S. representative to those talks, and so there's some intense discussion going on on the PKK itself. As far as the Iranian Kurds or from the -- what Turkey might be doing in -- to Iran in the Kurdish area of Iran, I would tell you that that is something that I'm not monitoring at all.

Q Okay. Thanks much.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: You bet, but two other things I would probably mention here if you don't mind, and again it was very nice yesterday -- and it's important for the readers to in your -- those on the Net to understand that yesterday we went up in an Iraqi C-130, the -- part of the brand new Iraqi air force -- into the Kurdish region. And so as their capability grows it's growing in all areas, and it was very nice to be able to step off with a very, very professional aircrew, speaking as an airman, to take part in the ceremony. And the second thing is I want to thank you all. You have probably the greatest impact certainly in the younger generation because of the medium, and that is -- this past Memorial Day kind of brought it all home -- and that is for the support that you give to the military members' families back there especially. It gives us a great sense of at least composure that they are being thought of and taken care of, especially on a day like this past Monday. So thank you for all you do.

MR. KILBRIDE: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Thanks again.

MR. KILBRIDE: Want to say today's roundtable program's going to be available online at www.defendamerica.mil with audio, print transcript and biographies. A related story will be written for American Forces Press Service and posted on the Department of Defense website at defenselink.mil, and if there are any questions, please contact DOD New Media at Blogger Outreach at hq.afis.osd.mil. And again, thank you, Major General Cichowski and Brigadier Robison, and all the bloggers, and that wraps up today.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Thank you.

Q Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

GEN. CICHOWSKI: Thank you much, Tim.

MR. KILBRIDE: Right. Bye-bye.

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